A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Author's note: The Penrose diagram cameos in this chapter, you'll know when. If you get confused, use the google, a visual might really help.

Chapter 23

The whole of Zygerria reeled in the shock of last evening's events, but Esera really didn't care. It was someone else's problem now, and she was off to create the next one.

"I thought I'd die on this rock," Faera said, as she helped Esera pack up. "Thank goodness you came long, if I had to give one crusty old aristocrat the special service, why, I thought I'd just turn on that shock collar and never turn it off!"

Esera didn't know what to say to that, so she nodded along awkwardly. The Twi'lek girl certainly was nonchalant about her abuse at the hands of her enslavers. Yashar, the Togruta, was far less adjusted to her situation. She'd spent the morning sitting silently at the window, staring wistfully at the sky. Prime Minister Tahnat, self-declared, had announced the immediate emancipation of all slaves on the planet, and as soon as possible, his government would see to it that they departed the planet for any location of their choosing as long as it wasn't Zygerria. That'd caused far more of a stir than Zygerria joining the Confederacy, which was secondary news at best.

The Zygerrians were having communications problems, though. They were getting information from the rest of the galaxy, but the rest of the galaxy wasn't getting information from them. Esera reminded herself to deactivate Khan's virus inside the planet's communications grid control computer after a few days. In yesterday's chaos, she'd forgotten that it went active the moment the droids turned on, to foil any Corporate Sector spies on the planet. That's why she needed to leave as soon as possible, to get ahead of the first wave of ships leaving the planet.

"Where are you off to next, Lady Komara? Hutt space?" asked Faera, when they were done packing. Esera was wearing much more practical clothes today, in case she needed to launch another regime change operation on the fly.

"No, not Hutt space," said Esera.

"Shame, they're the ones who sold me to Zygerrians," Faera said. "Not that Ryloth was any better, mind you. It was my own people who put me in chains first. So, where are you going?"

"Rimward," said Esera.

"The only place more rimward than Zygerria is... the Corporate Sector, I think." Faera looked thoughtful. "Why would you go there?"

Sharp girl, thought Esera, before remembering Faera was a year older than her. "Grievous has something for me to do, there," Esera told her. "But that's between him and I."

"Weird, how you just call him Grievous," the Twi'lek said, shuddering. "Like, isn't he really scary?"

"Yeah, he can be," Esera admitted. Speaking of the mad cyborg, she had to give him a debriefing on just what went down on Zygerria yesterday. She thought about that as Yashar and Faera helped her bring her things to her shuttle. "Well, this is it," Esera said.

"I suppose so." Faera looked thoughtful. "You know, I don't think I properly thanked you, for... you know, overthrowing the entire Zygerrian aristocracy in one night and having us all set free."

"We owe you our lives," Yashar said, head bowed. "If you ever need help, I will do all I can for you, even to the gates of death."

"If anyone owes you anything, it's them," said Esera, pointing at the palace that rose up behind them, hoping they wouldn't notice her sudden blush. She didn't like being revered. "I can't imagine what you've been through."

"Eh, I'll live," said Faera with a shrug, before she realized how uncaring she sounded. "The way I look at it, Lady Komara, is that I've got two choices. Either my past ruins me, or it makes me stronger. I'm choosing to be strong. I survived all kinds of horrible things. Not much scares me anymore. It's all up from here, you know?"

Yashar looked at her feet, and frowned. Of the two girls, Faera was definitely the more resilient in spirit. But Esera wouldn't blame the Togruta for being so messed up over her ordeal. It was a terrible thing for anyone to suffer, and it took a special kind of person to come out intact like Faera had. "You two stay safe out there, alright? There's a war on."

"Where isn't there a war?" asked Faera. "I think I'll head for Raxus, plenty of work there I heard. You going back to Kiros, Yashar?"

"I hope so," Yashar murmured.

Esera hoped so too. Before she left, she gave them her contact information, in case they ever needed help. And then, the shuttle lifted off, not forty-eight hours after arriving, leaving Zygerria an utterly changed world. Esera collected a sleepy Voyan from *Encounter,* still in his rumpled coralfish-colored outfit, and the two boarded Khan's supply ship. The droid was waiting for them at the foot of the shuttle's ramp.

"What the hell, Khan?" asked Voyan, before Esera could even open her mouth. "You were supposed to make sure that ship wasn't flagged as a pirate ship! Do you have any idea of how many times I've been strangled in the last day because of you?"

"Yeah, Khan, what the hell?" Esera joined in.

"Insolent organic," Khan said. "I am your superior, Lieutenant."

"I'm allowed to call out my superior for absolutely idiotic choices!" fumed Voyan.

"And I'm your superior, Khan. You better explain yourself." Esera put her hands on her hips and did her displeased noblewoman impression, which she was getting good at, in her opinion.

"It is quite simple. The mainstream galactic registries showed that freighter as recovered from pirates," Khan said. "The Zygerrian registry had not updated yet. I was unaware of this until it was too late, and by then you had already been arrested."

"Unbelievable," growled Voyan. "Komara, do I have permission to go back to *Encounter*? I don't think I can serve under this droid who has a blatant disregard for organic life."

Esera put a finger on her chin. "You finished fixing up the Vulture droids, right?"

"Yes..." the mechanic said, eyes narrowing as he began to suspect what she was thinking.

"*Encounter* isn't looking too good. Let's see what you can fix over there."

Voyan opened his mouth, then closed it. His shoulders slumped and he sighed. "Be careful what you wish for, huh?" he muttered to himself, going back into the shuttle.

"Sorry Khan, you're on your own. All my stuff is still over there," said Esera. "We'll depart when the drones finish gathering up the last of the fallen droids."

"Acknowledged, Komara," said Khan. "Do not be sorry, I do not need socializing to maintain mental health, unlike you. Grievous had a message for you, by the way."

"Oh?"

"He said you are sentimental and foolish."

"Okay, Khan." Esera rolled her eyes and closed the shuttle ramp. She gave Voyan a tired look. "You know, I hate that droid, I really do."

"...and then this guy named Mofuwa showed up, saying he was with the Nimbus Commandos, and that's where you picked up my call," Komara said. Her hologram leaned back in her hologram chair.

"I see," said Grievous. "You took a needless risk by not checking if you were being jammed that morning. Very careless, girl. I expected better of a Jedi."

"I'm new to this, alright?" Komara sighed as she watched her right hand twitch.

"And you made a mistake by not checking local records," Grievous said, pointing at Khan's hologram. The droid bowed his head.

"I was wrong to believe the Zygerrians would have updated registries, General. My calculations were wrong. I accept the blame for this error."

"Good," said Grievous. The last thing he wanted was an arrogant droid. He had too many organics like that already. "And you," Grievous turned to the other human, the jumpy lieutenant he'd met on the hangar deck. The human's hologram froze. "You did your duty. Next time, do it better."

"Yes, sir," said the lieutenant, as blood drained from his face. His worn-down uniform was Trade Federation issue, like every member of the crew on *Invisible Hand*. Grievous recognized the patch belonging to the engineering section. He seldom dealt with them, because although they kept his ship running, Grievous reserved his respect mostly for other warriors.

"Zygerria is just a bridge to the Corporate Sector's wealth," Grievous told the three. "You will conquer it for me, and you will do so swiftly. What is your plan?"

"Iaco Stark," said Komara.

"The pirate?" asked the lieutenant. "He's still around?"

"This is the same Iaco Stark behind the Stark Hyperspace War, is it not?" Khan asked.

"Yes, that's him, and yes, he's alive and well," said Komara. "Do you know who he was working for? The Commerce Guild. Do you know who his main rival in the Corporate Sector is? Baron Orman Tagge, one of the Republic's staunchest supporters out here."

"We used to end every department meeting by cursing the Tagge Company," the lieutenant said. "Back in the Trade Federation days. Now that corporate rivalry seems a lot smaller."

"We're going to use it, in a way," continued Komara. "Iaco Stark and Orman Tagge don't get along. Stark sells droids to us, the Confederacy. Tagge sells... pretty much everything under the stars to the Republic. Our prefabricated bases came from TaggeCo. Well, theirs. The Republic's. You know what I mean!" The girl gave them all a sharp look. "If we get Stark's help, we can probably oust Tagge from the sector, and that'll put the entire region under the control of our ally."

"I will not trust a corporate lackey," Grievous said. "Nor a pirate who betrayed his own people to save his skin."

"You want to go glass some planets?" asked Komara, crossing her arms and glaring at him. "Because that's the other option."

Grievous felt himself growling in annoyance. "Tell me, then, how will you ensure his loyalty?" he asked.

"The same way you get everyone else's loyalty, Grievous," Komara said. "Let him know that if he doesn't serve us, we'll kill him without hesitation. Because I know you will."

The lieutenant nodded to himself, and Khan clasped his hands. "My analysis concludes that there is a good chance of this scheme working," said the droid.

"Stark's got a droid factory, doesn't he?" the lieutenant piped up, looking surprised he'd even said anything.

"He does," Komara said. "He can build his own army. All we'd have to do is move it."

The two humans and the droid all seemed to be in concurrence about their plan. But the fact everything hinged on a known pirate and known turncoat did not sit well with Grievous. He'd have to take measures to ensure there'd be no surprises in store down the line. After dismissing the three, he immediately called up another human, one he knew he could count on.

"Aclinde," Grievous said to the hologram.

"General," Clothar Aclinde greeted, bowing. The middle-aged Carramite was as dreary-looking as ever, like an office clerk who'd spent thirty years at a desk. But there was a fire in him that burned hot whenever violence was near. That was something Grievous could relate to far more than Komara's sentimentality. "What can I do for you today?"

"The Confederacy is moving to annex the Corporate Sector, within the next few days. I am sending my agent Komara to make it happen. She intends to make a deal with a certain Iaco Stark."

"Iaco Stark... Now there's a name I haven't heard in a long, long time." Aclinde smiled grimly. "I take it the Office of Information and Safety is about to get a new assignment. How exciting!"

Encounter was a mess. *Encounter* was a waste. *Encounter* was a mistake. The more she toured the old *Recusant*-class destroyer, the more Esera saw how this ship had been badly neglected. *I just had to choose a ship with a name I liked,* Esera thought, *and it turns out to be the worst ship in the entire navy.* The *Encounter* wasn't even fit to be hauling garbage. It should have been hauled away *as* garbage!

But Lieutenant Miha Voyan wasn't one to back down from the impossible, despite his ornery attitude. He tracked her down on the bridge and delivered to her an entire list of the ship's major problems. "And do you know what the source of these problems are?" he asked her.

"No, that's why you're here," said Esera.

Voyan pointed at a repair drone.

"That droid?" Esera asked, raising an eyebrow.

"All of them," Voyan said. "I went digging in their coding. The Commerce Guild purposefully programmed them to become less efficient at repairs as time went on, necessitating more and more refits... provided by the Commerce Guild. They were running a racket on us. I've always suspected, but now that they're out of the way, I can actually present evidence without getting two blaster bolts to the back of the head and having it called a suicide."

That's oddly specific, Esera thought. "Lieutenant, what is it that you actually do?" she asked him.

Voyan stared at her for a moment. "I'm not sure what you mean," he said, all emotion vanishing from his face. He'd done this before, in Khan's lab. When something came up that made him uncomfortable, he hid that feeling. It didn't work on a Force sensitive being like Esera, though.

"You've said you're a mechanic. You've said your an engineer. You've joined the Separatists but made some rather anti-alien remarks. And you've now casually broken into a corporate source code. Forgive a simple ex-Jedi her ignorance, but I was under the impression that's not an easy thing to do. Who are you, Lieutenant Voyan?"

His eyes narrowed. "I'm an engineer who works as a mechanic, that's all," he said. "Getting into the source code was easy." Voyan tapped the datapad. "The password for the main computer is the ship's ID number. It was my second guess, after *admin*."

Esera folded her hands under her chin, and leaned forward in the captain's chair. "Are you in computer security too?" she asked.

"No," Voyan said, shooting a glance at the bridge's exit. "Look, there's nothing special about me. Anyone can do what I do, it's all very simple. Can we talk about how the Commerce Guild screwed us over on an unbelievable scale instead? Tens of thousands of these ships have been made, every single one is going to end up like *Encounter* sooner or later."

You dodged the alien thing entirely, well played, Esera thought. She'd get to the bottom of that later. "Can this ship be saved?" she asked him.

"Anything can be saved if you work hard enough," said Voyan.

"Alright. How hard can you work?"

The mechanic-engineer paused, realizing that once again he'd played himself. He put a hand over his face. "Get me access to Khan's supply ship and give me time to have a new program written for the repair drones, and I'll have this ship running again. I don't know when, but it will happen."

"Done," said Esera.

Encounter arrived at Reltooine almost a week later, after a long, circuitous route to avoid the Loyalists holding the Etti system, the transit hub of the Corporate Sector. Reltooine was a beautiful red-orange gas giant streaked by creamy bands of clouds. Orbiting above it was the spindle-like shape of Eclipse Station, Stark's pet project. Esera wasn't impressed, the station was far smaller than she'd expected for something with a completion date scheduled for almost ten years from now. "Get me Stark," she said to a pilot droid.

"Hailing frequencies open," the droid reported.

A view screen lowered down from the bridge ceiling, blank at first, and then showing the logo of Rossum Droidworks. After a minute of silence, an image snapped to life. Esera found herself looking at the galaxy's most infamous once-was pirate. Time had not been kind to Iaco Stark. The holovids she'd seen in her youth had familiarized Esera with the heavy-set figure and fiery red hair of the pirate, sporting his characteristic sideburns and goatee. But in the twenty-five years since Stark's failed bid for power in the Outer Rim, that red hair was fading to white, and that large frame had turned from muscular to fleshy. He must have weighed as much as three Eseras, she figured. *Why am I always dealing with people at least twice my size?* she wondered.

"Lady Komara, welcome," Stark said, his gravelly, tired voice a far cry from the golden baritone of the recordings of yesteryear. "What can I do for the Separatist Alliance?"

"The Confederacy of Independent Systems requires your aid, Mister Stark," Esera said, remembering how uppity Voyan had gotten about the term *Separatist Alliance*. "But there's a lot in it for you, too."

"Yeah, I'm listening," the former pirate said, wheeling his hand around for her to continue.

"General Grievous has decided it's time for TaggeCo and the other Loyalists to leave this sector. He wants you to be the one who kicks them out, and takes over their operations."

Stark nodded to himself, looking away off-screen. "Straight to the point, huh? The Biscuit Baron's goons aren't going to go out without a fight, you know."

Biscuit Baron? Esera thought. That was a strange nickname. "Mister Stark, I have a fleet, and I have one of the finest tactical minds in the galaxy at my disposal. You have droid factories. I think together, we could manage such a fight. The entire Corporate Sector could be answering to you."

"I do like the sound of that... Alright, let's talk," said Stark. "Why don't you join the wife and I for dinner, nothing too fancy, and we'll do business."

Always with the dinners! Esera fumed internally. At least this man had a wife, he *hopefully* wouldn't try anything like Atai had. "That sounds lovely," Esera forced herself to say, keeping a pleasant expression on her face. How much diplomacy took place over dinner in the galaxy? Too much. Then again, food that was both real and free was something she couldn't pass up. Not after over three years of ration packs.

This time Esera wouldn't make the mistake of going alone. She called up Voyan and Khan to accompany her onboard Eclipse Station, and a contingent of BX-series droids for security. "You're not wearing *that* to dinner," she told Voyan, pointing at his worn-down working uniform.

"It's this or the coralfish outfit," he told her.

"Go put on the coralfish outfit." Esera tried not to smirk as she imagined the hapless mechanic in an actual coralfish costume, not just a colorful suit that was eight years out of style. The vision of Voyan trying to pick up a fusion cutter with fins on his hands did actually make her laugh. *What's happening to me if I find something this stupid the peak of comedy?* she wondered. *Is my life really that stressful?*

Encounter docked with Eclipse Station, while Khan shuttled over from his supply ship. They must have looked quite the trio. A tall, hulking droid painted black with three glowing red eyes, a short little girl in a diplomat's dress, and a Navy officer who looked like he should have been in a seedy night club and not a starship. Esera was starting to get used to strange combinations like this.

Iaco Stark showed up in person to greet them, with his wife, Arris Rossum. She was an aging woman, but doing so more gracefully than her husband, there was an elegance and dignity about her, unlike the lumbering, decaying Stark. Arris was the heiress to Rossum Droidworks, her marriage to Stark must have been at least somewhat business-related. Their son, Iaclyn, and their daughter, Elli, were there too. Both were about Esera's age, and of course, both were taller than her. Iaclyn took after his mother in appearance, Elli took after neither of them. *Interesting,* thought Esera.

"Oh, a Druckenwellian!" Stark said, when he saw Voyan. "No one else in the galaxy would be brave enough to wear a shirt like that!"

"Actually, I'm from-"

"I remember my time on Druckenwell," continued Stark, smiling off into space as he guided them to a dining room. "Great music, beautiful women, illegal speeder races at night, some truly crazy drugs... Yep, being young on Druckenwell was something else, let me tell you. You kids stay away from that planet, you got it?" he told Iaclyn and Elli.

Voyan pulled at his collar, and looked off to the side. "The music was good, yes," he agreed.

"You ever heard of Glam Promise?" Stark asked him.

At that, the mechanic's eyes lit up. "Running Crooked was her best album, I think," he said.

"The boy's got taste!" Stark boomed, clapping his hands. He had them all sit at a table. "I respect that, she definitely came into her own on that one. For me, it's Degrees of Dance. A lot of people say there wasn't enough lyrical stuff, but the rhythm, man, the rhythm!"

Voyan and Stark hit it off on the subject of Druckenwellian electrosynth music. "Dad's got such weird taste in music," Iaclyn sighed.

"It's tacky!" Elli stuck out her tongue.

"I hope your lieutenant doesn't need sleep, he's going to be talking all night about this," Arris told Esera. "This is the first time in years Iaco's met someone who cares about the music he likes."

"I'm sure that's nice," Esera said, "but I've got a mission to do here."

"I have analyzed this station's security," said Khan, leaning towards her, "and I estimate a ninety-nine percent chance that my forces could take it with minimal casualties. We could easily force things to move along."

"No!" Esera hissed. "These are our allies, Khan!"

Iaclyn raised an eyebrow at the droid. "Are these tactical droids usually so... forward?"

"Yes," said Esera. "Remember Khan, I'm in charge here."

"Acknowledged," Khan said. "I will continue to monitor this foolery."

"I hate you, Khan."

"Acknowledged."

As it turned out, Iaco Stark was more interested in talking decades-old dance tracks with Voyan than he was in the opportunity to rule the Corporate Sector. His wife and children, though, were more than ready to talk business with Esera.

"Dad's fallen prey to his obsessions," Iaclyn told her, once Stark the Senior and Voyan had gone off to inspect his music collection and audio theater. "Eclipse Station, cybernetics, and yes, Druckenwellian pop music from way back when. Day-to-day running of Rossum Droidworks and our other holdings out here is up to us."

"I want the best possible future for my children," Arris said. "I'm not stupid enough to go against Grievous, not after he killed Palpatine and escaped that coup back-to-back. That droid is untouchable."

"Don't call him a droid to his face," muttered Esera. "But yes, betting against Grievous is a good way to lose."

"The Holonet keeps saying the defeat on the Confederacy is inevitable," Elli said, looking worried. "They say you're losing on every front. Is that just propaganda?"

"Absolutely propaganda," said Esera. "We're stronger than we're letting on. Grievous's retreat to the Outer Rim was a ruse to draw attention away from Coruscant, so he could take down Palpatine. It worked. Soon, we're going to take the initiative again. And to do that, we need the Corporate Sector's resources." Actually, the Confederacy *was* losing on every front, until recently. The war had slowed down a lot as the Republic consolidated its forces against a renewed raiding campaign. For the moment, the front lines were mostly still. But if enough people believed they were winning, they'd do what needed to be done for the Confederacy to win.

"So, we're taking down TaggeCo and the other bootlickers." Iaclyn cracked his knuckles. "Their droids are no match for our Baktoid-designed ones. TaggeCo couldn't build a good battle droid if they had a billion credits in funding. Mom, Elli, you two hammer out the details with Lady Komara here. General Khan and I will prepare our move."

Esera got the feeling it was Iaclyn Stark who really called the shots around here, because his mother and sister went along with him without question. They sorted out what the Starks would keep for themselves, what would be sent to Raxus to aid the war effort, their security and military obligations, other political concerns, and Esera even secured a small share of the spoils for herself, which she was had a good use for in mind. Esera was glad the negotiation training she'd done at the Temple was finally paying off. By the next day, they had a deal that Iaco Stark signed onto with hardly a thought to it. "Every decision I make seems to backfire," Stark said with a laugh. "It's better to just let my wife do the talking, she's got better luck!"

Stark's droid army wasn't huge, but it wasn't small either. He had a well-armed and well-equipped infantry force, just what was needed for the surgically-precise corporate way of warfare out here, where every action was weighed against how much it'd cut into one's profit margin. The mere threat of a battle would be enough to bring many to the table, Iaclyn was sure. Those who wouldn't, TaggeCo and the other extreme Loyalists, would have to be fought. On the ground, Stark's droids could win. In space, however...

"We call it the Tagge battlecruiser, because that seems to be its fleet function," Iaclyn said, showing Esera and Khan a hologram of the ship. It was huge and triangular, typical of any Kuat Drive Yards product. But it wasn't made by Kuat, it was made by Tagge Industries Shipyards. "It's heavily-armed and fast, but most of its defenses are shields, not armor."

"Do we have anything that could handle such a ship?" Esera asked Khan.

"Negative," Khan said. "We will need to find an alternate means to deal with such a ship."

"Can't you call up reinforcements?" Elli Stark asked.

What reinforcements? Esera almost asked her in turn, before remembering she had an act to keep up. "I'd rather not," said Esera. "Leave the battlecruiser to me, I'll handle it. Once I draw it off, Khan's fleet can deal with their smaller cruisers."

Their battle-plan was simple. From Reltooine, Khan's fleet would attack Lythos, and evict the Loyalists from the strategic system sitting at the intersection of the Hydian Way and Trianni Shunt. Once Lythos was secure, all that would stand between them and the Shaltin Tunnels leading to Zygerria was the Etti system, which was controlled by TaggeCo and its allies. As long as the Loyalists held Etti, they could strike anywhere else in the sector.

"How do I fight a battlecruiser with a destroyer?" Esera wondered aloud while in the shower. The first things Voyan had fixed were the hygiene facilities aboard *Encounter*, and Esera was thankful for it. "You'd have to be stupid, to fight fair in an unfair fight like that... So I have to fight unfair. How do you fight unfairly in space?"

Khan had the start of an answer. "The local environment is your primary resource for evening the odds," he said. So Esera went to the astrographic observatory aboard *Encounter* and started looking through the projected sector star chart. Fourteen light-years from Etti's sun was a black hole and a debris field surrounding it. The system was uninhabited and only had an alphanumeric designation, there was nothing of interest there. No explorers had ever visited it in person before, it'd only been charted from afar.

"System LQ-30256," Esera said, after calling Voyan to the observatory. "One black hole, no planets. What can we do with it?"

Voyan, fresh from working, tapped the tip of his fusion cutter to his chin, an action that made Esera squeamish. "Lots of interesting things happen near black holes," said Voyan. "They warp the fabric of space-time, in realspace, and do funny things to hyperspace too."

"And..?"

"And what?" asked Voyan. "We avoid black holes for a reason."

"Because they suck things into them, right?"

The mechanic squinted at her. "That's a very elementary understanding of it," he said. "Didn't they teach you anything about classical physics at... Jedi school, or whatever you have?"

"No..." Esera said, feeling a bit of heat on her cheeks. "I've been at war since I was fourteen, I haven't even taken trigonometry-" She stopped when she saw the shocked look on Voyan's face.

"Fourteen?" he echoed. "They sent a fourteen year old girl to war?"

"I'm not defenseless," Esera muttered.

"That means you're... seventeen years old." The mechanic ran a hand through his hair and looked away. "Seventeen! I've been lead around by the nose by a seventeen year old girl who doesn't even know trigonometry!" He looked at her, aghast. "You're not even old enough to drive a landspeeder on your own, where I'm from. You should be in secondary school, not negotiating with pirates and fighting slavers!"

A sudden wave of self-consciousness washed over Esera, not unlike what she'd felt so often during her stay with the Sephi sisters on Raxus. *I'm just a child to the rest of them,* she thought. *I'm a child who's seen more death and done more killing than most of them ever will.* "Look, Lieutenant, seventeen years old or not, I'm still your boss. Tell me about this black hole. How can we use it?"

"Right, then..." Voyan went to the control panel, and messed around for a bit. "Look at this diagram," he said, bringing up something that looked like a diamond. It was some kind of graph, but the lines were warped, and the axes were connected to each other to form the diamond shape. "Let the X axis be space, extending infinitely along the horizontal. Let the Y axis be time, extending infinitely along the vertical. These lower two edges," Voyan pointed to the connections that went from the ends of the X axis to the bottom of the Y axis, "are the past horizon. The upper edges are the future horizon. Do you understand?"

"I think so, yes," said Esera. "Why are the graph's squares warped like that, though? They all go to a single point at the ends of the graph axes."

"Think of it like a representation of infinity," Voyan said. "A small movement near the edge of the graph will be covering a huge amount of space and time, compared to the mostly unwarped areas near the center. Trust me, this works better than a normal graph. Now, in realspace, there is an absolute speed limit, the speed of light. Or causality, rather. We bypass this every day through hyperspace, but we're not in hyperspace, so let's ignore that for the moment. And we can only move forward in time. So, as we have to move up the Y axis, that's the only direction we can go there. But we can move any way we like over the X axis, since space is open to us like that. Since light moves at the speed of light, obviously, it's always moving at a slope of one towards the future horizon. One unit of time along Y for one unit of space along X."

"Yeah, I learned about graphs," said Esera.

"We can only see behind us, to the past horizon, inside a cone bounded by that slope of one. We can only see ahead of us, to the future horizon, inside a cone bounded by that slope of one. This is called the light cone. Does this make sense?"

"Yes," said Esera, imagining those cones on the graph. She noticed that a slope of one meant lines traveled at a forty-five degree angle, and intersected the edges of the graph at a ninety degree angle, perfectly perpendicular. Was that going to be relevant?

"Now, every black hole has its own horizon. The event horizon. I'm sure you've heard this term before. Let's replace one of our future horizons with the event horizon of a black hole." Voyan changed the label on his diagram. He drew a line to the event horizon. "As our line approaches the event horizon, you and I are moving straight up the Y axis, through time but not space, as we are observers. The closer this line gets to the event horizon, the longer information from the line takes to get to us." He traced out a series of connections, all with the light-speed slope of one, from the line to the Y axis. "Look at how many squares are between us and the line by the time it reaches the horizon. By the time it gets to the event horizon... that information is never going to reach us."

"Because the speed of light has a slope of one, and the horizon also has a slope of one," said Esera. "It'll travel infinitely along the horizon. If we wanted information from the event horizon, it'd have to have a slope of less than one, covering an unequal amount of space in relation to the amount of time."

"Exactly," said Voyan. "It'd have to travel faster than light. You can't do that in realspace. That's only allowed in hyperspace, a different graph from the one we have here."

"The graph's squares near the horizon are so warped, the lines representing the passage of time are closer together near the edge than they are near the Y axis," Esera noted.

"Good eye. Yes, time would pass slower for you near the event horizon than it would for us observing it. This is relativity, another classical mechanic we bypass in daily life."

"Interesting..." said Esera, putting a hand on her chin, an inkling of an idea dawning in her mind. "How do we bypass that?"

"With relativistic shielding, of course," said Voyan. "Every hyperdrive has a relativistic shield built into it. Hyperspace is still beholden to the curvature of realspace. I won't get into it, you'd need a semester of university-level education to even start to understand why. That means those space-time squares from our diagram get warped, and without a relativistic shield, if you fly too close to a black hole, or a really large star, or whatever, more time passes in normal realspace than it does for you. It also helps us deal with with length contraction, because the closer mass gets to the speed of light, or speed of causality, rather, it becomes infinitely-"

"I think I get it," Esera interrupted, because she'd never heard the word *causality* before in her life and hearing it twice in five minutes was too much. "Can a relativistic shield be turned off without anyone noticing?" she asked.

"It's possible, you'd need to be inside the ship's computer though..." said Voyan. "Hold on, are you thinking what I think you're thinking?"

Esera smiled. "I think we're going to visit a black hole, Lieutenant. And that Tagge battlecruiser is coming with us."

"She's doing what!?" Grievous coughed out.

"She is going to fly around the event horizon of a black hole, General," Khan's hologram repeated.

"What if it sucks her in?" he asked.

"That is not how a black hole works, General," said Khan.

"Then how does it work?"

"Allow me to present to you a diagram-"

"No." Grievous waved the droid off. "Just tell me."

"One moves down the curvature of space-time until-"

"Stop. What is *space-time*?"

Setting up the trap had taken no small amount of effort. With the help of Iaclyn Stark and Khan, Esera had faked a series of signals that lead the TaggeCo scouts to system LQ-30256, where a Separatist-standard pre-built listening post had been placed on a conspicuous asteroid. The system was on their minds, now. A much better hidden listening post had noted the arrival of the TaggeCo scouts, who deployed their own listening post, for a grand total of three in a system of utter worthlessness.

The attack on Lythos went exactly to plan. Khan's fleet swept aside feeble loyalist resistance in orbit, and Confederate battle droids proved their superiority to the battle droids TaggeCo built. The Z-X1, based on the failed L8-L9 prototype, proved to be clumsy, stupid, and slow, incapable of taking cover or precision targeting. They reminded Esera of how Separatist droids were portrayed in Republic propaganda vids like *Landing at Point Rain.* In reality, though, it was the Republic who had such useless automatons, not the Separatists. When their enemies weren't born-to-die clone troopers who'd spent their entire waking lives training lead by prescient Jedi knights, the battle droids were terrifyingly effective. No wonder the Trade Federation had crushed the Naboo and Gungans so easily, thirteen years ago.

Within two days, the agriworlds of Lythos and their mineral rich moons were firmly in the hands of the Starks, and by extension, the Confederacy. Next was Etti, which required finesse.

"What kind of gravitational forces are we expecting?" Esera asked Voyan, who was performing repairs on *Encounter* up until the last possible minute.

"Big ones," said Voyan. "But our ships are held together with tensor fields, anyway. We'll have to divert some reactor power to compensate, it won't be a problem."

"Is the relativistic shield working?"

"Yeah." The mechanic wasn't worried at all. In fact, he was excited! But the closer they got to springing this trap, the more nervous Esera became. She'd done her research for this. Relativistic shields weren't invincible, nor were they well-understood, being ancient technology that had just been copied by rote for untold generations. They dated back to before the Republic, and perhaps even to the days of the Infinite Empire, when Coruscant had forests and Tatooine had seas. Too much strain would cause the shield to fail, that was why large gravitational distortions were evaded even in hyperspace.

"Even a few seconds of failure could send us decades into the future," Esera said, pacing about on the bridge. Voyan looked up from his terminal where he was running a diagnostic.

"We'll get to see who won the war, at least," he said.

"Doesn't that worry you?" asked Esera. "You've got a family out there, right?"

"Not one I ever care to see again," Voyan said. "This is a win-win for me, Komara. If it works, we pull off one hell of a maneuver. If it fails, we get to see what becomes of the galaxy. You're a Jedi, too, there's no one out there waiting for you to come home." Her silence must have been telling. "Or is there?"

"Well..." Esera looked away. "My sister and my brother are still alive on Stalimur. I would have liked to see them again."

"You're sounding like we've already failed," said Voyan. "But, the Trade Federation didn't send me through four years of school for nothing. I know what I'm doing."

The mechanic was stunningly confident when he was in his element. His passion for his work overpowered his usually distant and asocial nature. *Have I ever met a normal engineer?* Esera asked herself, thinking back to the non-clone officers in the Republic Navy. *No, I don't think I have.*

Grievous decided to check in the next morning. His hologram glowered down at Esera. "You are a bold one, Komara," he said to her. "I don't understand what you're doing, but it had better work."

"Lieutenant Voyan is confident it will," said Esera.

"You put your faith in that strange little creature? I thought this was your plan."

"It is my plan, I'm just nervous about it. You're not the one about to fly down a black hole's throat in a decrepit old warship," Esera said.

"You could have asked for help," said Grievous.

"You'd never have respected me if I did."

"Hah!" barked the cyborg. "You know me well. If you die today, die with glory. If not, return to me in victory. You have impressed me this far, Komara. Don't stop now."

"That's one of the nicest things you've ever said to me, Grievous," Esera said, raising her eyebrow. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I am trying to be supportive of your competence," said Grievous. "By the way, when you return, I will teach you how to fight with your left hand."

"Ah..." Esera tried to close her right fist, and found that it still couldn't. She'd almost forgotten about it, she was so used to it now. "Yes, I think you're right. We'll do it when I return."

"See to it that you're not late," Grievous said in a cool voice, terminating the transmission. *Heh, late.* Grievous understood more about her plan than he let on, to make a joke like that.

Zero hour came at last. Khan and the Starks wished Esera and Voyan good luck, and then they were off. The mechanic went down to *Encounter*'s little hangar to do one last check on the Vulture droids and their vital ordinance.

Encounter made the hyperspace jump to system LQ-30256, and Esera beheld the beast. There, before her, was a softly glowing disc of gas and debris and light particles, spiraling down to a collective doom, frozen in time to an outside observer like Esera. Not only did she see the side of the disc in front of her, she could see the far side of the disc, and the underside of the disc, as the intense gravity bent the light towards her so that all of it was visible at once. Her head hurt trying to make sense of it. In the center of this array of curved lights was a dark orb, darker than anything she'd seen before. A faint ring of light marked the extent of its shadow, photons pulled so far down the gravity well they circled the event horizon several times before emerging to meet her eyes. How long had that light been down there? How many eons had it taken to traverse that warped region of space and time?

Esera sat alone on the bridge with the silent droids, clasping her hands until her knuckles were white. *A Jedi shouldn't be afraid,* she told herself. *Fear leads to the dark side!* But this was no ordinary fear. The cosmic force she was gambling with was beyond light and dark. It was a primeval power, one still not fully understood after ten thousand years of spacefaring civilization, something that had always been feared and avoided.

"Wow," Voyan said, walking onto the bridge. "Look at that."

"Yeah, it's something," Esera said. "Is everything ready?"

"As ready as it'll ever be," said the mechanic. "You ever seen one of these up close before? It's my first time."

"No, never," said Esera. She stared into the darkness, to the place from which nothing would ever escape.

"It's crazy, isn't it?" Voyan shook his head, but a stupid grin came over him, the first Esera had ever seen. "We're actually going to go down there. I can't wait. I need to go get my recording equipment, this one's going on the shadowfeed for sure."

"This isn't the time for things like that," Esera said in a strained voice.

"Why not?" asked Voyan. "I can count on two hands the amount of people who have gone this close to a black hole before. We're making history, Komara!" With that declaration, he jogged down the hall into the rest of the ship. Esera was once again alone with the beast and the droids.

"You all don't seem too excited," she said to them.

"We are just doing our jobs," said one pilot droid.

"Affirmative," said another. "Cosmological phenomena are merely natural objects."

Voyan came back, and set up his holorecorder at very front of the bridge, one lens pointed forward, the other pointed up for some reason. Esera didn't like him messing around on the eve of battle. "Don't you have anything better to be doing?"

"I checked the payload again, the Vulture droids are still ready to go. The rest of the fleet is in position. The Loyalists' listening post is reporting our presence. We only have to wait."

Minutes later, the Loyalist fleet arrived. The Tagge battlecruiser was with them. "Khan," Esera said to the supply ship, "get out of here."

"I am already on my way out," Khan said, as the rest of the Separatist ships began jumping the fourteen light-years to Etti. Tracking their most likely trajectory, the Loyalist ships began turning around to jump too, including the Tagge battlecruiser.

"Hit them with everything we've got and charge the hyperdrive," Esera told the droids.

"Roger roger." *Encounter*'s prow turbolasers opened up, pummeling the battlecruiser's shields. On the view screen, Esera saw the red bolts pounding away at the enemy ship, it's five thrusters blazing blue as it accelerated. A few green turbolaser bolts shot back at them.

"Voyan, dump the hyperdrive," ordered Esera.

"Dumping," said Voyan form his console. *Encounter* began spewing gamma radiation from her engineering section, as if she'd been hit and had a catastrophic hyperdrive malfunction. In reality, they'd kept enough gamma radiation in the hyperdrive for an emergency short-ranged jump, but the Loyalists didn't need to know that. "It's working," reported Voyan. "They're turning around, they smell the blood in the water."

"What?" asked Esera. *How can anyone smell in water?*

"For a girl who called me a coralfish, you sure don't know much about aquatic life," the mechanic muttered. The difference between Voyan at the engineer's console and Voyan in a firefight was like day and night.

"Pilot, turn us around and start moving to the black hole. Launch Vulture droids."

"Roger roger."

"Now, the moment of truth," said Voyan, wringing his hands. "We just need one buzz droid to get on that ship."

"What would we have done if they didn't take the bait?" Esera wondered, trying to get her mind off the slowly-growing beast outside the bridge windows.

"The chance of that was minuscule," Voyan said. "Back in the Trade Federation days, we would have all jumped at an opportunity to take down pirates. It's a boring job, being in a private fleet. Not much happens, your employers don't want to risk the investment they've made on you. But here they are, away from their employers, with a Separatist destroyer that can't flee before them... If I was on that battlecruiser, I'd be mutinying if the captain didn't take this chance."

"I see," said Esera. She swallowed, and stared at the black hole. "What happens if the buzz droids don't succeed?"

"Oh, we're screwed, then," Voyan said with a shrug. "I'd say we get to Etti with Khan and then ram the battlecruiser."

"Why didn't I think of that?!" cried out Esera, putting her hands on her head. "That's so much easier! We're about to dive down to the event horizon of a singularity when we could have just rammed this garbage scow into them!"

"Hey, this black hole trick is something no one's ever done before," Voyan said. "This is going to be the high point of my unremarkable career, Komara. I am sincerely thankful you've given me this opportunity."

"At least one of us is happy," Esera sighed.

"Buzz droid missiles launched," Voyan said, looking at the readout for the squadron. "That battlecruiser doesn't have much in point defense, they're going to make it in." Esera breathed a sigh of relief. "See? Everything is going to be alright."

Don't hex my plan, Voyan! Esera thought.

The missiles flew in on the tactical display, looping and whirling until they found their ways to hangars, airlocks, or exposed conduits. When they burst, their nefarious cargo was deployed, and swarms of buzz droids were soon all over the ship. All it would take was one droid to make it to a computer terminal, and to insert the virus Iaclyn Stark had made, that would provide a false reading for their relativistic shield's functionality as it turned off.

They counted down the minutes as the black hole drew closer and closer. "Mission accomplished," Voyan suddenly said. "The virus is in!"

"Full power to the engines!" Esera commanded to her pilot droid. *Encounter* rocked as she accelerated forward at twenty thousand meters per second. Four hours of flight at this acceleration would put them near the speed of light in realspace. Esera felt like someone was stepping on her, pinning her to her seat.

"She's rated for twenty seven thousand meters per second of acceleration," Voyan said, patting the top of his console. "But her reactor can't operate at a hundred percent because of damage to the radiators. Poor baby."

"We're doing this without full reactor power?" Esera gasped, clenched the armrests of the captain's chair.

"Yes, we are," said Voyan. "I thought I told you that? Oh, inertial dampers are at only ninety-nine point nine six percent effectiveness. That explains why it feels like we're being pushed backwards..." Esera checked the readouts. They were accelerating at over two thousand Gs, but at this effectiveness of inertial dampener, they were feeling just over two Gs. "Alright," Voyan said, "that's fixed." The weight on Esera's chest vanished.

"And the shield?" she asked.

"All systems green," Voyan said. "We're entering into warped space-time."

"Rear viewer," Esera said. The screen showed the Tagge battlecruiser, growing closer, kilometer by kilometer. "That thing sure is fast..."

"My, my, they're thirsty for the kill," said Voyan. Ahead, the black hole grew larger and larger. *Encounter* rolled onto her side, and the black hole shifted until it was underneath them, like a vast sea swallowing all the light around them. Which it actually was.

"Um, Lieutenant, when are you activating the virus?" asked Esera.

"Once we rocket off at an impossible speed, from their perspective, they're going to realize something's up and run a diagnostic on their relativistic shields. It should take them less than half a minute to get them back on. They'll return to the normal flow of time and continue the pursuit," said Voyan. "When to activate it is up to you. But right now, we'd only put them a few hours behind us."

It dawned on Esera that she was about to displace an entire ship of people from time. Maybe days into the future, maybe years. How many had families waiting for them back home? How many had lives she was about to destroy forever, if she waited too long to activate the virus? "Lieutenant, what kind of men join these corporate fleets?" she asked.

"Men like me, usually," Voyan said, looking at the battlecruiser.

"What does that mean?"

"People who don't matter, that's what it means. People who could die tomorrow and no one would know they were even gone," he told her. *Now where have I heard words like those before?* Esera asked herself. *Oh, right.* That was the conclusion she'd reached in *Invisible Hand*'s medbay, that she didn't matter.

Voyan went on. "You activate that virus and don't think twice about it. No one's going to miss them but the loan sharks they owe money to."

"Okay," said Esera. "Let's... let's put them three years into the future."

"Got it," said Voyan. Half a minute later, he sent the activation code. Then he sent it again. He pressed the button several times. "We have a problem, Komara."

"What?" Esera's voice jumped up an octave.

"One of our comms circuits has shorted," said Voyan, as cool as a winter day on Shumavar. "I'm rerouting the system, stay calm."

"Just fix it," said Esera. She let out a long breath, only for it to catch as she looked out the bridge windows. The black hole was rising up around them, the walls of darkness climbing higher and higher into the starry field. "Voyan, what the hell is going on?"

"Ah, our light cone is shrinking," said Voyan, tapping away at his console. "We're getting close to the event horizon."

"We're inside it! Look, it's all around us!" Above, the stars were shrinking to a circle of light high above them. The bridge grew dimmer and dimmer, until the only illumination left was the lights of the consoles.

"No, we're not inside it. But we are so close that only a tiny fraction of the universe's light is still reaching us, the rest is going into the singularity directly beneath us. So it looks like we're inside, but we're not." said Voyan. "Damnit, another short circuit! Going to another backup."

Esera wanted to scream as panic rose in her heart. The entire known universe had been reduced to a halo of warped light above them. The viewscreen was trying to show the pursuing battlecruiser but the image was so distorted that neither the computer nor Esera could make sense of it. *Encounter* was shaking and groaning as her frame was torn between the gravity, tensor fields, and her own molecular bonds.

Then, the alarm went off. No, *every* alarm went off, the bridge went crimson with blinking lights, and sirens blared in her ears, and a second later, the droids announced the damage reports.

"Lady Komara, we've lost power in engine number two!"

"We've lost directional stability!"

"We're falling out of orbit towards the singularity, Lady Komara!"

"The hyperdrive's gamma radiation disappeared!"

"*What happened!?*" This time, Esera actually did scream.

"We've lost relativistic shielding over engine two and a portion of the hyperdrive. Our gamma radiation is gone, the hyperdrive is out," Voyan said, his face draining of blood. "The engine... exhausted its fuel supply approximately four hundred years ago."

Esera's heartbeat accelerated to a dangerous level as *Encounter* tumbled towards the event horizon, the halo of light above growing smaller and smaller and spinning around them. Her head felt light, her knees were weak. She collapsed into the captain's chair and watched the estimated kilometers to the event horizon drop like a rock. There was absolutely nothing she could do.

"Adjust thrust vectoring to compensate for the spin," Voyan announced, a wild look on his face.

"Roger roger," said a droid.

"I'm cutting off engine two from our system," the engineer went on. "Reroute all reactor power to the remaining engines and emergency thrusters, get us back into orbit!"

The droids obeyed, but it wasn't enough. "Sir, we have stabilized our directional velocity, but we don't have enough thrust to get back into orbit!" one said.

Voyan's eyes went wide as he stared at his engineering console, and he let out a stream of swearing that would have made even Esera's master blush. *Master Callo!* she suddenly thought. He wouldn't have sat here uselessly, thinking there was nothing he could do! Esera was a Jedi Knight, she had the Force!

"Voyan," she said, her voice trembling. She forced herself to stand, and went to the engineer. "I'm going to perform a battle meditation. Open your mind to me."

"What? How?"

"When you feel something, don't fight it! I've never done this before, but... here I go," Esera said. She closed her eyes, breathed in, and embraced the Force as she laid her hands on Voyan's shoulders. Her spirit reached out, and found Voyan's, and she began the meditation.

"Whoa," the engineer said. "What the hell... This feeling... Is this the Force?"

"Yes," said Esera. "We need thrust, Voyan. How can we get it?"

He was silent for a few moments. The estimated distance to the event horizon was slowing its drop, but not stopping. "The cooling," he said. "The reactor is at seventy-four percent power. If we can get it to one hundred percent, we can get back into orbit."

"What can you do to get the reactor to full power?" asked Esera. She fed her hope and will to survive to Voyan, and his determination grew, empowering his calm certainty that he could do what was necessary, and that fed back into Esera's own hope. The positive feedback loop of the battle meditation had begun.

"Before anything else, I have to return tensor fields to normal strength. Then, I can think of two options," Voyan said. "First, I can bypass the system and put the reactor on full power, risking a meltdown. Secondly... oh, it's a long shot, Komara, but we dump the waste heat into the shield system and hope the capacitors can hold. I've never done that before. It might overload our shields; deflector, ray, and relativistic. They're not supposed to work that way. But it's better than getting turned into noodles as we fall faster than the speed of light into the singularity, right?"

"Yes, yes it is!" Esera said. "Do it!"

On the console, Esera saw the reactor power jump to one hundred percent, as Voyan worked his magic. "Please repair drones, do your jobs for once!" the engineer prayed. *Encounter* rumbled and groaned as she fought back up the singularity's gravity well.

"I believe," whispered Esera. The Force was in all things. Man, woman, droid, ship, even the photons falling down from that distant halo of stars above, distorted by gravitational lensing, the entire universe with everything that had ever lived and ever would live in it, reduced to a few specks of light above towering walls of darkest shadow. That light and life up there was forever beyond the reach of the monster below them. *We can do this!* Esera thought. *I believe!*

The estimated distance to the event horizon stopped at twelve kilometers, and began to climb again, just as reactor temperature began to climb. "We're doing it," Voyan breathed. "We're doing it! We're getting back into orbit!" Esera's eyes watered, but she didn't let up on the battle meditation. "Come on, baby," Voyan said to *Encounter*, "hold it together! You can do this!"

The halo of stars grew larger and larger, the walls of shadow began to sink back into the sea of darkness below. Esera could have cried for joy at being able to see so many stars again. In fact, she did. Just a little bit.

"Bless the light cone, bless it," Voyan said, as he passed the waste heat from shield capacitor to shield capacitor. The only ones he didn't touch were the ones around the bridge and prow. On the view screen, the Tagge battlecruiser emerged as the light rays straightened out, bearing down on them fast. "Right, the comms!"

"Can you fix those and manage the heat?" asked Esera.

"No," said Voyan. "You take over the capacitors."

"What do I do?" asked Esera.

"Do what feels right," Voyan told her.

Do what feels right, her master had told her that once, long ago. The battle meditation flowed both ways. Esera took her hands off his shoulders; physical contact wasn't needed for the meditation, but that extra bit of reassurance could and had gone a long way. She sat at the console, and did what she'd seen Voyan doing, while he worked on the comms circuits. Esera let the Force guide her.

"Got it," Voyan said. "Comms are up."

"Send the virus," ordered Esera.

The Tagge battlecruiser suddenly vanished, reduced to a tiny speck far away, hanging in space like it was frozen there "They'll be following us out in about fifty-two years," Voyan said.

"That'll do," said Esera. "How is the reactor looking?"

"You're doing great," Voyan said. "Better than me, actually. You stay at that console, I'll check out our orbital situation."

"How is it?" Esera asked, not daring to look away from the reactor temperature and capacitor temperatures.

"We're still in trouble," Voyan said. "We need engine two back if we're going to get back up to normal space-time." An overwhelming sense of purpose and drive flooded the battle meditation, Esera didn't know if it was from him, or herself, or both of them at once. "I'm going back there," the engineer announced. "Those Commerce Guild drones aren't programmed for that, I need to see it myself."

"There's no relativistic shielding back there," Esera said. "I don't want to find a skeleton down there when we're out of here."

"I'll do whatever I need to. Keep those capacitors from blowing," Voyan said. Then, he was gone. Esera had the droids tell her their current altitude above the event horizon, and how close they were to normal space-time. *If only the hyperdrive was still up,* she thought. But part of the hyperdrive was out of phase with the rest of the ship, just like engine two. They couldn't jump until they were back in normal space-time, which would defeat the whole purpose of having a hyperdrive right now. *It's all on you, Voyan! You survived the Zygerrians! You can survive this!* The tide of hope rose in her heart once more.

The intercom activated after a long while. "Voyan here," he said. "I'm at the phase boundary. Engine two is fine, I think, it's just a few thousand years old now. Might have trouble starting up again. I'm going to take a look at the hyperdrive."

"Got it. Be careful," said Esera.

It was a few more tense minutes before Voyan spoke again. "Alright, I see the problem. The relativistic shield generator burnt out a connection. One of several hundred. I'm going to fix this myself. Very delicate operation."

"Don't let those Commerce Guild drones near it," Esera said, for lack of anything else to say.

"I should mention the phase boundary is about a meter away. It's fluctuating a little. I can see it on the edge of my vision, like a thin film..."

"Voyan!" Esera groaned. "You're going to give me a heart attack. Fix that generator!"

"Already on it."

Esera sat nearly still at the engineering console, watching the reactor temperature tick up into the red, higher and higher. Her hands were shaking and sweaty. She was sweaty everywhere, really. "Hey, Voyan, the reactor's getting hot. Very hot."

"I'm honestly surprised it hasn't melted yet," Voyan said, sounding distracted. "Keep it up, Komara, you're the only reason we're still alive."

"No, I'd be dead with out you, several times over," said Esera. "This is a team effort."

"Sure," said the engineer. "Ah! Haha! Yes, there we go! Relativistic shields should be up!"

"Confirm that," Esera said to a pilot droid.

"We have relativistic shielding over engine two and the whole hyperdrive unit, Lady Komara," said the droid.

"You did it!" cheered Esera. "Now get engine two started!"

"Me?" asked Voyan. "I'm in the hyperdrive-"

"Anyone!"

"Roger roger," a droid said.

Encounter rumbled, as the now-ancient engine sputtered to life for the first time in millennia. "How's it going, pilot?"

"Engine two is operating at fifty percent thrust," said the droid.

"Fifty percent will do," Voyan said. "I'm heading back to the bridge."

The engineer appeared after a few minutes, just as sweaty and disheveled as Esera imagined she looked. The first thing he did was peek at the reactor temperature. "We're moments away from a meltdown," he said. "Let's just drop that output down to thirty percent for a bit." Gently, he brushed Esera's hand away, and lowered the reactor power. "There we go. Don't worry about the shields, we'll be back in normal space-time any second now..."

"We have left the region of space-time that requires relativistic shields," a droid reported.

The two sighed in relief. Voyan pushed his hair back, and leaned against the captain's chair, while Esera slumped at her seat at the engineering console. They let the shields drop, and put as much distance between the black hole and them as they could. In the Force, Esera felt something strong from Voyan, a sense of pride and purpose burning bright.

"We did it," said Esera, releasing the battle meditation. Weariness flooded her body.

"Yeah... wow, we really did," agreed Voyan. "I didn't tell you this, but the tensor fields were failing, too. The whole ship was maybe twenty seconds from tearing herself apart."

"You..." Esera closed her eyes, and exhaled. "You kept your cool a lot better than I did," she decided on saying.

But Voyan looked troubled, suddenly. "Battle meditation, that's what you called it?"

"Uh, yeah?" answered Esera.

"Did you take control of my mind, or something?" asked Voyan. His brow furrowed. "I don't understand where all that... that... willpower, and hope, and all those feelings, I don't know where they came from. It was like I wasn't even myself, there. A puppet on strings."

"No!" Esera said, shaking her head. "Not a puppet! That's the dark side way of doing things. I'd never use my power for that! Everything you felt came from within your own heart. It was in you all along. All I did was encourage it."

"Huh..." The mechanic-engineer put his hand on his chin, staring out at the accretion disk of the black hole. "I never thought a Jedi would use her magic to help me save a ship."

"I'm not a Jedi anymore," Esera sighed. "Look. I get it. To you, I'm nothing but a celibate zealot raised by fanatics cloistered away in a temple, I've spent the last three years killing your friends. To me, you're a weird guy whose life seems to revolve around mechanical engineering and obscure music and little else, who has spent the last three years at the very least enabling the killing of *my* friends. *We* don't have to be friends, Voyan," said Esera. "But we don't have to be enemies, either."

"Friendship is a waste of time," said Voyan. He went down to collect his holorecorder. He picked it up and without another word, walked off the bridge. Esera watched him leave, puzzled by his sudden and abrupt departure. *What was his problem?*

"Something rotten is afoot, Senator," Director Orlok of Republic Intelligence muttered over a glass of Savarian brandy. "First a Zygerrian revolution, now that droid pirate, Khan, has taken over the Corporate Sector with the help of Iaco Stark... They're planning something, and it's big."

"Obviously," said Tarkin. The two were meeting discretely, or at least as discretely as men of their rank could, in a certain exclusive club's bar. "Any news from our spy rings in their industrial core?"

"Torn to pieces in the last two weeks," Orlok said. "The few we've got left out there are sending in reports about some new Confederate department. The Office of Information and Safety, they're calling it. These guys are going around, making surprise inspections, busting down doors, making people disappear... Whoever's in charge is a professional, Senator. The spies they're not catching, they're scaring so bad that they've gone silent. Tens of thousands of informants, thousands of saboteurs, there's only dozens still talking to us now. And I have no idea how many of them have been turned."

"Ill news, to be sure," Tarksin sighed.

"What about the production tables I showed you? Did you pass those on to Chancellor Amedda?"

"Yes," Tarkin said. No, actually, he hadn't. The way he saw it, the Republic needed to take the Separatist threat more seriously. Palpatine had his boot on the neck of the traitors, and his successor had failed to step down hard enough. That fool Amedda was content to keep their fleets defending the Core and Colonies, letting the Outer Rim Sieges fizzle into nothing, giving the Separatists time to rearm. When they made their move and revealed their true strength, it might very well terrify the useless, short-sighted Senate into opening negotiations again. That would not do, not at all.

So, Tarkin had a plan. Amedda had put too much faith in him as an intermediary between the military and chancellor's office. He could control what information reached Amedda. The idiot would never know that the Separatists were going to eclipse the Republic in production for several months, soon. No, he had to believe that this was the last-ditch gamble by the rebels to force the Republic to terms. He had to believe it wasn't as serious a threat as it was. And when the true extent of the losses became clear, when Coruscant could see the disaster that had befallen the Grand Army of the Republic under his leadership, Amedda would be finished as a politician. Everything he stood for would be tainted with a legacy of inaction and willful ignorance. Then, only then, would the stage be clear for Tarkin to implement what the great Ado Eemon so rightly called *total war.* The Senate would accept nothing less than the unconditional surrender of the Separatists, as every resource available to it would be put into the war effort. The only trouble was the Jedi Order. But Tarkin considered himself a smart man, he was certain he'd figured out what Palpatine had in store for those meddling mystics.

"Something funny, Senator?" Orlok asked.

Tarkin became aware he was smiling. "Amedda doesn't believe your production tables, Director. I can't help but find it amusing the fate of our democracy rests in the hands of an imbecile for another few months. I see trouble on the horizon for us."

"Trouble, that's one way to put it!" Orlok downed the rest of his brandy in one go. "More like the end of the Republic if we do nothing!"

"And Amedda will do nothing."

"Millions are going to die!" seethed Orlok. "And there's nothing we can do to stop it..."

Yes, a few million would die. A few hundred star systems would be lost. A few dozen fleets would be destroyed. It'd all be preventable, unlike what Director Orlock thought. But Tarkin needed their sacrifice to prove, once and for all, what he had been telling the galaxy all along:

Peace was never an option.

Author's rambling essay about time dilation and time control: And so ends act two of ASD 2.0. I wrote about 9000 words of this 11.6K word chapter in a single day, in two separate sessions (three days of editing followed). I know Voyan's explanation of space-time and black holes isn't one hundred percent on the mark, but the flaw there lies with the author being a hack. But hey, there's some science in your science fantasy setting! Remember that guy at work who you politely asked about last night's basketball game since you know he watched it and it's something to talk about on a slow morning, and then forty minutes later he's outlined in great detail to you all his March Madness brackets for the past decade? Really, was that just me who had to deal with him? Well, that's Voyan, just with nerdier things than sportsball. And we haven't even met ASD version of that guy who- oh, that's a spoiler.

Anyways, the idea of Esera messing with someone else's relativistic shield and taking them for a spin around a black hole so that they'd be stuck in time dilation for a few decades has been in my head for like two years now, ever since I came across that technology on wookieepedia. It was a lot of fun to write, I hope you had fun reading it. Some really funky stuff happens. If you didn't get why engine number two on *Encounter* ran out of fuel "centuries ago" (from the perspective of Esera and Voyan), that's because the relativistic shield is keeping our strong female protagonist™ and that other guy we don't care about in the same timey-wimey wibbely-wobbly thingy as the rest of the galaxy. For the engine, it was only a few minutes without fuel. But from the engine's perspective, the rest of the ship was basically frozen in time and no longer communicating with it, it exhausted its propellant in the system and that was that. To Esera and Voyan, though, they perceived those few minutes as thousands of years for the engine. For both parties, only a few minutes passed. Due to the curvature of space-time that only effected the engine, though, the "canonical" perception of time goes to Esera and Voyan, since they're on the same timey-wimey thingy as everyone else out there with a working shield. This gets funkier, though:

Let's talk more about the relativistic shield and the implications it has for Star Wars. I know, we're in the danger zone where we think about this setting and it all breaks down because George Lucas just wanted to do a 1970s take on 1930s Flash Gordon serials, but bear with me. A technology exists that can change the flow of time within a certain region. I imagine it's like a warp field but for the Y-axis (time) on the Penrose diagram (you were supposed to look that up). Temporal manipulation exists in Star Wars, even before those episodes of Rebels. Furthermore, all these relativistic shields need to be tied to a constant flow of time that everyone is apparently on. What keeps the standard? Do they put little quartz crystal watches in there and pray they don't loser power? Is there some obscenely ancient Rakatan computer out there, telling these devices how to regulate the flow of time within them? And it's gotta be the Rakatans who came up with this, because they're the ones who invented the hyperdrive as we know it. So you've had a thousand generations of hyperdrive makers putting in this device that they *must* have no understanding of (because if they did understand it, they'd realize they have a time machine on their hands), which is warping time around them according to some universal clock hidden away in a far corner of the universe for god knows how long. Damn, this is more like Star Trek than Star Wars. It's an absolutely fascinating concept to me. I was thinking about this in bed after finishing this chapter, I had to write all this out and get it off my chest.

Oh, one more thing. I'd like to thank everyone who gave their opinion on the pacing of this story in last chapter's reviews. It means a lot to me to have you guys actually give some feedback on what I'm doing. I have trouble knowing where to stop but I'm glad my readers seem to enjoy that. I won't sweat about pacing too much from here on out. Just know that I have an ending in mind and I am moving towards it. Filler does not exist in ASD. Okay, it does, but in very small parts. See what I mean about not knowing where to stop?

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